The Fourth Church Pulpit

FOOLS FOR CHRIST

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And oh, the heart, the heart! ... "Be fools for Christ," said the Apostle Paul, and thus I was thy bearded Saxon fool and clown for sure ... O Thou that asketh much of him to whom thou givest much, have mercy. Remember me not for the ill I've done but for the good I've dreamed. Help me to be not just the old and foolish one thou seest now but once again a fool for thee. Help me to pray. Help me whatever way thou canst, dear Christ and Lord. Amen.

Frederick Buechner
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Scripture
John 4:7-15
1 Corinthians 4:8-13

"We are fools for the sake of Christ."
1 Corinthians 4:10a [NRSV]

Have you ever done something outrageously foolish for love?

One time Frederick Buechner was invited to participate in the 200th birthday celebration for a small Congregational church in New England. Buechner is a novelist who happens also to be a Presbyterian minister. His task was to preach the sermon at the worship service which would celebrate the founding of the church two hundred years earlier. As he prepared for his assignment, he read through much of the old church's archives and historical records, and he made a wonderful discovery which turned into the title for a book, *A Clown in the Belfry*. It seems that a hundred-and-fifty-years earlier the church had done some major renovations (a topic with which we have accumulated some experience around here recently!). Part of the work included the addition of a handsome new steeple with a bell in it. The way Buechner tells it, when the steeple was "set in place and painted, an extraordinary event took place." Howard Murgett, who wrote the church history, records that one day "in 1831, after the steeple was added, one agile Lyman Woodward climbed all the way up and stood on his head in the belfry with his feet toward heaven." [p. 115, 116]

Buechner was intrigued when he made this discovery — as I was when I read it. Buechner studied on to see what else Lyman Woodward did. Maybe he was a deacon or an elder, a Sunday school teacher, a man about town. Maybe he went to seminary: people who do things as outrageous as standing on their heads in the steeple often end up in seminary. Nothing. His name never is mentioned again in the church records. All we know about Mr. Woodward and maybe the only thing he ever did related to religion, church, and Christianity was stand on his head one day in the belfry. But it is enough, isn't it?

Buechner muses:

> "I love him for what he did. It was a crazy thing to do. It was a risky thing to do. It ran counter to all standards of New England practicality and prudence. It stood the whole idea that you're supposed to be nothing but solemn in church on its head just like Lyman himself standing upside down on his, and it was also a magical and magnificent and Mozartian thing to do."

Have you ever done anything foolish for love? Surely you have, although perhaps it has been some time ago. Have you not been wildly extravagant, tried your hand at poetry, sent too many roses? Have you never sung the National Anthem too loudly or the opening hymn of praise so that the people around you peered cautiously at you over their glasses? Have you not stood on your head in some belfry or another? I confessed once, and will do it again because confession is, I am told, good for the soul, that when a new little girl moved to our neighborhood and was assigned to my fourth-grade class, I went home, took all my savings out of my little globe bank, marched to the store on the corner, purchased a whole brown paper sack full of candy and chewing gum, secretly placed it on her desk and have felt foolish ever since.

She moved away not long after, so there is no more to this story, either!

It is an intriguing thought — that acting a little foolishly has something very human about it, something delightfully honest and important.

In the Middle Ages there was a holiday in Europe known as the Feast of Fools. It was usually celebrated around January 1 and on the occasion everyone donned a silly and sometimes bawdy mask and costume and acted outrageously. Even the clergy got into the act: young priests strutted about in the formal robes of their ecclesiastical

superiors, with painted faces, mocking the most serious and stately rituals of the church.

The higher ups never liked it very much and the custom faded away in the 16th century during the Reformation. [See Harvey Cox, *Feast of Fools*] But it was an interesting phenomenon.

In addition to affirming our humanity, foolishness has a way of speaking a word of truth when human beings take themselves and their customs and the institutions they have created too seriously. Tyranny does not have a sense of humor. Comedy is always a little dangerous to the establishment because it punctures pomposity and laughs at all the self-important posturing, the over-drawn uniforms of puffed up dictators, the regal rituals of totalitarianism. Hitler closed down the Cabaret because it was foolishness and it made him look foolishly human. Visitors to the Soviet Union always reported on the absence of comedy, laughter, gaiety, at least in the presence of the authorities. Political parody is a treasured American tradition and has been from the beginning. There are comedians who have specialized in skewering a politician and the politicians themselves understand that it is an expression of the health and freedom of our society.

Foolishness serves an important humanizing function, and an important political function, and it is also an interesting and very important theme in the writing and thinking and faith of St. Paul. In his first letter to the early Christian Church in Corinth Paul raises the idea and invokes the word repeatedly: the cross of Christ is foolishness ...

> "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." [I Corinthians 1:18]

Later in the letter, he returns to the theme:

> "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God." [I Corinthians 3:18-19]

And finally:

> "We are fools for the sake of Christ." [I Corinthians 4:10a]

Paul is writing to a Christian community in a Greek city, a city proud of its tradition of philosophy, rationalism, logical thinking. In major Greek cities like Corinth there was a kind of open air university, a philosophers guild. Intellectuals would gather at a designated public space, near the market place, and engage in public debate. Their students who had come to be with them and learn from them, audited eagerly, taking notes, observing. Interested town people stopped by on the way to market.

I think Paul is writing to a community of Christians who is being laughed at because of the irrationality of their religion.

Plato, the quintessential Greek philosopher, had said that God was one, God was truth itself, beauty itself. The philosophers talked about a powerful God who is in control of the world and ultimately the events and flow of human history; a God who is the essence of the highest and noblest human experience: goodness, truth, beauty. It all made imminently good sense.

The good news about Jesus Christ, Paul realized, is about a very different God. Not that categories of goodness, truth and beauty are wrong, mind you. It's just that the essence of it is a crucifixion. Paul was utterly captivated by the notion that God has become one of us; assuming the limitations of humanity, that in Jesus Christ as much of God as human beings are capable of comprehending is accessible, available, visible.

Christianity is not anti-intellectual. There is, and always has been, a kind of Christianity that seems to refuse to engage the life of the mind, that shuts out modern scientific knowledge. It keeps appearing in movements to base scientific curriculum in the public schools, not on what science knows, but on the basis of what somebody thinks the Bible says.

Paul was a thinker, an intellectual. The Christian faith and the Christian church have, down through the centuries, provided the impetus, energy and often the resources for education and research to happen. Christian faith is never antithetical to the full use of the human intellect to analyze, to doubt, propose, learn, conclude.

It's just that Christianity, Paul's variety, particularly, understands the limitations of the human intellect and human reason. There are other ways of knowing. There is, beyond the rational, the cerebral, another knowledge ... a knowledge of the heart, the spirit, the emotions.

It is the difference between the way the technician at the Adler Planetarium sky show demonstrates light years and orbits and constellations, and Vincent Van Gogh's stunning *Starry Night.*

It is the difference between a learned theological essay on the atonement, and J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion.*

It is the difference between a biological, sociological and anthropological analysis of the attraction and intimate bonding of male and female genders, and a warm embrace.

Every now and then Christianity needs a reminder that religion is not merely a set of tidy ideas, that the human relationship with God is not an intellectual exchange, that access between the holy and me is through my heart and soul as well as my mind, and that God is not an object, not an "it" to be analyzed but a "Thou" to love and cherish and with whom to live in faithfulness.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian, taught that intellect takes us only so far in our reach for the ultimate, for God. When we have thought and argued and struggled as long and hard as we are able, Kierkegaard said, each of us must take a final "leap of faith," and it will not always be a completely rational leap. It may even be a bit foolish.

Paul understood that the temptation for thoughtful people is always to make their religion too reasonable, too understandable, too pat. The temptation always is to limit and domesticate God. But the God of Christian faith is not a philosophic abstraction about which we make proposals, but a parent to whom we bring our requests, our needs, our pains and joys, our laughter and tears; and our religion is not a way to think, a list of ideas to be affirmed, but a life to be lived.

The cross is foolishness, Paul realized, not only because it personalizes God, brings God right into the human situation at its most human, making God vulnerable, weak, altogether too human. It is also foolish because it suggests foolishness as a life style, that we are, in some way or another, fools for Christ.

How? Well for one thing by making some preposterously counter-culture proposals about the way to really live a life. As I read the newspapers this morning, and ran my eyes over the advertising, it is clear that the model of full human life in this culture is having enough stuff never to be vulnerable, out of style, or ever inconvenienced again. And here comes Paul:

> "We are fools for the sake of Christ ... we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed, beaten and homeless ... when persecuted, we endure; when slandered we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things ..." [1 Corinthians 4:10-13]

The Christian faith proposes that real human life is lived when we are willingly more vulnerable, not less, when we give prodigally, when we assume burdens, responsibility, pain even which we could avoid. The Christian faith proposes that the sublime foolishness of God is, finally, the only wisdom there is.

It is not easy, of course, to risk foolishness. *Dead Man Walking*, the motion picture, and the book by Sister Helen Prejean, is the powerful story of a nun who becomes involved, almost by accident, in the final journey of a convicted murderer, sentenced to death in a Louisiana state prison. The movie does not argue for or against capital punishment, at least not overtly. It merely tells a strong and honest story of a woman, who, in the name and for the sake of her deepest religious faith, decides to accompany a condemned man, guilty of unspeakable crimes, to his

death. And what she does confounds everybody: the penal system which is spending enormous amounts of money to depersonalize and dignify and disguise the fact that the state is going to kill a man; the old chaplain who sees his responsibility to persuade condemned men to say the right words, to save their souls in heaven; the parents of the two teenage victims who were murdered, and who are so consumed by grief and hatred that they are virtually paralyzed and cannot begin to comprehend why a nun, a representative of their own church, can care about and stand with a condemned killer.

Alone in the middle of all of this — the conventional wisdom of the judicial system, the conventional wisdom of grief, hatred and revenge, justice as an eye for an eye — Sister Helen risks representing an alternative vision, the simple strong love of God in Jesus Christ who lived and died for all of us. She alone is a "fool for Christ."

St. Paul suggested that to know about Christ crucified, the weakness and vulnerability and suffering of God, is actually to begin to know the power of God. And he suggested that to understand the incongruity, the foolishness of Christ on a cross, is to begin to know something of the wisdom of God.

One of our most distinguished Christian thinkers, Yale theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, wrote a book, *Fools for Christ*, and put it beautifully:

> "God chose the simple of the world to confound the wise ... While the philosophy of Athens and the theology of Jerusalem were speculating about Him, He chose to be born in Bethlehem to the utter consternation of both speculative philosophy and theology ever since." [*Fools for Christ*, p. 20]

It is, I submit, of the greatest importance for the fullness of your life and the salvation of your soul that you risk a little foolishness for the sake of love, that in some way you learn to be a fool for Christ.

We began with a man standing on his head in a belfry and so let us conclude. There is much serious work to be done: children to be raised, buildings to be built, cases to be argued, sales to be completed, reports to be filed, meetings to attend, decisions to be made, but let us not forget Lyman Woodward, silhouetted up there against the sky. [See Buechner, p. 116]

And let us, in some way, do that too. Become fools for love, fools for Christ, foolish for the sake of our Lord whose own foolishness, which loved so completely that he gave away his own life, is the very wisdom and the power of God. Amen.